

VZCZCXRO4416
OO RUEHWEB
DE RUEHPF #0396/01 0601048
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 011048Z MAR 06 ZDK CTG UR SVC RUEHZC 8711 0601124
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6137
INFO RUEHZS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1329

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PHNOM PENH 000396

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PHUM PREL KDEM CB
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY IMMUNITY RESTORED TO THREE
CAMBODIAN OPPOSITION MPS

¶1. (U) Summary: On February 28, the National Assembly reinstated parliamentary immunity for three opposition MPs, including opposition leader Sam Rainsy and approved replacement of a former opposition MP. Two nominees from FUNCINPEC were elected to be Senators. PM Hun Sen called on political parties to continue their work for the national interest and hailed the day as historic for the democratic process in Cambodia. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy and the PM spoke with journalists and posed for photos together; FUNCINPEC's Prince Norodom Ranariddh hastily departed the NA following the vote to avoid journalists' questions regarding his rumored mistresses. End Summary.

Opposition Leader Rainsy Returns to the NA

¶2. (U) On February 28, Cambodia's National Assembly, presided over by FUNCINPEC leader and NA President Prince Norodom Ranariddh, approved reinstatement of parliamentary immunity for opposition party leader Sam Rainsy and two SRP MPs, Cheam Channy and Chea Poch. Sam Rainsy extended his thanks to King Sihanouk for granting him a pardon and to the National Assembly for reinstating parliamentary immunity to himself and his two colleagues. The session approved SRP choice Mrs. Men Monirothana to replace Khem Veasna, who had earlier been dismissed from the party in 2005. The National Assembly's move received praise from PM Hun Sen as "the best time of Cambodia's democracy since 1993." Speaking to journalists following the reinstatement of immunity to Rainsy and the others, the PM said that he applauded national reconciliation among the three political parties, which was for the Cambodian national interest. Charge lauded the move the National Assembly as "a good day for Cambodia's democracy."

¶3. (U) The National Assembly removed the immunity of Sam Rainsy, Cheam Channy and Chea Poch in early February 2005. Subsequently, Cheam Channy was arrested and later sentenced in a widely criticized trial to seven years in prison for allegedly raising an illegal army; Sam Rainsy, who had fled Cambodia following the lifting of immunity, was convicted on charges of criminal defamation and sentenced in absentia to 18 months in prison and fined. Chea Poch also fled Cambodia in February 2005 but returned in August 2005; he was never convicted of any crime, although criminal defamation charges are still pending. King Sihanouk's recent royal pardons to Cheam Channy and Sam Rainsy

paved the way for the NA to restore the immunity of the three MPs.

NA Votes Two FUNCINPEC Nominees to the Senate

¶4. (U) Also on February 28, Princess Norodom Bopha Devi and H.E. Sabou Bacha, nominees from FUNCINPEC, were elected to the Senate in a secret ballot at the National Assembly. Princess Norodom Bopha Devi, a sister of Prince Norodom Ranariddh, and H.E. Sabou Bacha, a former Senator, were among 10 nominees to the Senate that included two nominees from the SRP (Thach Setha and Ly Nary), as well as six names from other parties and civil society. According to the procedure of the secret ballot, each of 118 MPs attending the session are eligible to select two of the ten candidates nominated from the parties and civil society. Princess Norodom Bopha Devi received the most votes at 91, Sabou Bacha 84 votes, Thach Setha 24 votes, and Ly Nary received 23 votes. MPs from FUNCINPEC and the CPP cast their votes in favor of the two candidates from FUNCINPEC, as Hun Sen had said earlier that the CPP would not challenge FUNCINPEC for the two Senate seats.

Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy: First Photo Op

¶5. (U) Hun Sen, Sam Rainsy and Tioulong Samaura (Rainsy's wife and an SRP parliamentarian) had a 20-minute informal conversation in front of the National Assembly before the session started. Reporters gathered to listen to the remarks and take photos of the political leaders. Hun Sen reportedly reiterated

PHNOM PENH 00000396 002 OF 003

the government's intent to form an authority aimed at resolving land disputes. Concerning actions against corrupt government officials and their mistresses, Tioulong Samaura told Hun Sen that the SRP fully supported the PM's recent remarks signaling his intention to penalize such people. Hun Sen said the CPP was good at politics while Sam Rainsy responded that his party's strength was in economics. Hun Sen told Sam Rainsy that the CPP needed economic expertise while Sam Rainsy responded that the SRP required political acumen.

Prince Ranariddh Dogged by PM's Accusations

¶6. (U) The press corps noted that NA Leader Prince Norodom Ranariddh has never avoided reporters during his two terms as President of the National Assembly. Following the NA session on February 28, however, the Prince exited the National Assembly via a back door, as local and foreign reporters congregated at the front of the NA hoping to interview Ranariddh as he departed. Observers speculated that Ranariddh wanted to avoid any questioning of his rumored affairs and the PM's recent criticism of government officials and their mistresses.

¶7. (U) In his remarks in Kompong Cham on February 26, Hun Sen ordered CPP lawmakers to draft a law aimed at corrupt officials using government resources to support mistresses, who in turn use their illicit relationships with government officials to receive bribes and gain positions for relatives and friends. Most observers agree that Hun Sen's remarks were aimed at Prince Norodom Ranariddh and his relationships with Mrs. Ok Phalla, former wife of former Minister for Tourism Veng Sereivuth, and Ms. Duch Sophear, a young Cambodian actress.

¶8. (SBU) The PM said he planned to seek assistance from France, Australia, Canada and the United States to

investigate real estate purchased by RGC officials. He accused one official of having purchased two residences for a mistress. (Note: It is general knowledge that Ranariddh bought two large residences for Ok Phalla, who became Ranariddh's unofficial wife shortly after she and Veng Sereivudh divorced. In September 2005, Hun Sen refused Ranariddh's request to appoint Ok Phalla as Minister of Tourism, a position formerly held by her ex-husband. End note.) Hun Sen also said he would dismiss a number of unqualified government officials who had been appointed at the behest of mistresses and relatives. Hun Sen also criticized an unidentified official for escorting his mistress to an official government function. (Note: The remark again appears to have been directed at Ranariddh, who took Ok Phalla to an official ceremony in Manila some time ago. A Filipino newspaper reportedly published an article about the ceremony and referred to Ok Phalla as Princess. The ceremony also was aired on Cambodian television. End Note.)

NA's Next Action: Constitutional Amendment

¶9. (U) The National Assembly is expected to take up the SRP-proposed Constitutional amendment changing the votes needed to form a government from a two-thirds majority of the NA to a 50 percent plus one formula. The new formula will be submitted to the National Assembly on March 2. Hun Sen said DPM Sok An would represent the government to consult on the proposed Constitutional amendment. The PM expects there to be minimal debate as the three political parties already agree that the proposal is a good one, and will prevent political impasses in the future.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The National Assembly vote on February 28 was another positive step towards returning Cambodia to a more democratic playing field and restoring the political opposition's parliamentary immunity. Hun Sen and Rainsy's amicable conversation in front of the NA was in marked contrast to Ranariddh's hasty retreat out the back door, and symbolic of the current relations among the three parties. Despite the PM's public remarks, we do not anticipate a draft law targeting mistresses in the near future. Extramarital affairs

PHNOM PENH 00000396 003 OF 003

are not confined to a single political party and while Ranariddh's well-publicized affairs are an embarrassment to FUNCINPEC, other public figures - including the PM - have been rumored to stray on occasion. We doubt CPP lawmakers will be pushing for legislation anytime soon. End Comment.

MUSSOMELI